

MELISSA NGIAM

CEO of Yayasan Generasi Gemilang

HARIS HASSAN/THE EDGE

A big fan of small beginnings. This is the mantra that Melissa Ngiam subconsciously repeats throughout our conversation at the office of Yayasan Generasi Gemilang (GG). But judging from where the non-profit organisation stands a decade after its founding, it has become a proven conviction.

It is also a personal belief that mirrors the young CEO's journey in the non-profit world, starting during an in-between-jobs lull when she volunteered at GG — which helps raise and empower underserved children and families through education in order to break out of the cycle of poverty — a few days a week in 2011.

“No, no, no, I never thought I would end up here, running an NGO,” laughs the Kuala Lumpur-born lass who is a certified accountant. “That’s the honest truth. I suppose coming from a quintessential middle-class background, the idea was always to have a corporate career.”

And she did for a while, working at PwC for three years after returning from Australia. Still, she felt unsettled. Serendipitously, she came across GG and its founder Daniel Tan and ex-chief operating officer Noelle Tan when she was looking at alternative opportunities, such as investment banking and other corporate roles.

Coming from a corporate background herself, Noelle opened Ngiam's eyes to the possibilities of applying the things that corporations were really good at, “like scaling, making things efficient”, and melding them with things that NGOs were good at, like looking into community needs.

Noelle also got the accountant away from just balancing the books and into the meeting room for brainstorming sessions, where Ngiam soon found herself running her first pet project, PRUkasih. It was a free temporary financial protection plan for urban poor communities offered in partnership with Prudential Assurance Malaysia.

“That experience was the key lesson for me in terms of being faithful to the small things, or even just keeping at it because it was a very, very small project. We launched it only in one community to begin with. Now it covers 40,000 households throughout Malaysia,” Ngiam says.

While the idea of doing social work resonated with her — “I believe we have to do good. It cannot just be one group in society benefiting but it has to be all of us. Everyone needs to do their part. It's just what vehicle with which you do it. This became mine.” — Ngiam says it was only when she attended a summit on corporate social responsibility (CSR) that she felt her “calling met her purpose”.

Being in the room with corporate figures hit her with an epiphany. “I remember thinking, ‘this is a career!’ It was a ‘I want to do this’ moment, to see that there is a value we can add to people who want to do something and to be that bridge.”

Ngiam has not looked back since, going on to head the partnership team, then becoming COO when Noelle stepped down, before being appointed CEO early this year.

“I think there are a lot of generous Malaysians, whether on an individual or corporate basis. I think the problem may lie in the fact that they just don't know how to or what is the best avenue,” Ngiam observes. She points out that CSR has grown in the last few years. “They are exploring doing things differently, thinking more of giving back to society in a meaningful way, and not just hand you a cheque, although that's good too if it fits,” she adds.

Besides Prudential, among GG's partners past and present are brands like Danone, Microsoft, Google Malaysia, Mah Sing, KLK and CIMB Foundation, to name but a few.

Ngiam's focus now is to grow the reach of GG's programmes. “Scaling is something that NGOs are not inherently good at, to begin with. But scaling our programmes sustainably is a problem to tackle. Let's say we want to target not 400 children but four million children in tackling inequality or poverty. How do we do that, especially without profits?”



It is just as well that the plucky CEO relishes a challenge, particularly in finding solutions. “I think one approach we are really trying to work on is growth through collaborations, especially with other NGOs. We are but one, but the fact that there are many NGOs and even individuals out there, it will be interesting to see how we can work together and create some sort of network, be it just moving along the same path or building each other up, or to see if we can jump onto the same page and make two great ideas a fantastic one.

“But we will start small with what we can do. In fact, all our projects with great impact started this way. If it's a genuine problem, we find that the seed grows naturally. That, and getting the foundations right — it makes a difference whether things grow or grow into a headache.”

Ngiam cites GG's reading programme for B40 families as a successful example. It started with 15 children but now benefits 400. “This is without pushing or promoting it. Unfortunately, there's a waiting list too. And children love to come!

“We have parents telling us that when they collect their children's report card, the teacher asks what they have been doing. Their children are getting top marks in class for English. It's really heartwarming,” says Ngiam.

Similarly, when GG first saw the need to train, motivate and upskill orphanage caretakers, they started with one Social Welfare Department (JKM) operated home in Cheras. Recognising the importance of the project, the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Develop-

ment eventually stepped in with funding and by last year, GG was covering all JKM-run homes in Malaysia.

Not bad for a 34-year-old who once worried that she was going to languish in volunteerism and not fulfil her potential professionally. Ngiam smiles. “People have a certain perception about NGOs or they don't fully grasp what volunteering means. Doing it well requires a lot of thought and intention behind it.” She credits the founding members for laying solid foundations for GG in terms of structure and good corporate governance.

Having a relatively young — incidentally, predominantly female — team helps keep her motivated. Ngiam says she enjoys the high energy pace and ready-to-go spirit, not to mention adaptable and quick-on-their-toes culture. Perhaps, this comes from their prioritising of upskilling and personal and collective development.

“I think it's only fair to them because these young people are coming in and giving you their time,” Ngiam points out. Exposure is the other key, with all GG staff regularly going for training or volunteering, including the CEO herself.

“Being hands-on, it's something we try not to lose. It's easy to sit here and look at data, and it makes sense. But when you try to execute it, that's when you realise that it may not always translate. We also don't want to lose sight of the fact that behind every number is a life.”

Looking back, Ngiam says it has been a good 10 years for GG. But she and her team are looking ahead, “to try to make sure more people have access to, say, our materials or programmes, and reach many more. Again, we start small and who knows where it will end?” — Mae Chan